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# Housing zones as new housing acceleration tools

On 10 February 2016, LSE London held their second roundtable of the project, 'Accelerating Housing Production in London'. A small group of experts from the public, private and academic sectors gathered to discuss the role that Housing Zones might play in accelerating housing production.

Housing Zones were originally a London initiative, developing out of the Mayor's Housing Strategy. While the original conception was very broad-brush, it has emerged as a fully-fledged policy because Housing Zones have proved popular with local planners and developers who have added substantial flesh to the bones of the idea. Twenty-five bids were received and 20 accepted, collectively leading to more than £21 billion of investment, 120,000 construction jobs, 53,000 new homes (around a third to be affordable), major station upgrades, new schools, new bridges and new community amenities. Housing Zones in London attract funding in the form of £200m grants and £200m loans. While significant sums in themselves they are nevertheless relatively small compared to the large funds they have leveraged into these developments. They are specifically designed, via partnership working and dedicated management teams, to kick-start large scale (sometimes multi-site) developments, many of which had been stalled. So, what lessons did we learn from our roundtable about these new housing acceleration tools?

## **Relationship building is key**

All of our participants stressed the importance of relationship building in the fine art of unlocking stalled sites. Often the role of the GLA as funding provider and coordinator was vital in this even though the amounts provided are often quite

timeframe. The GLA also provided ‘marriage guidance’ and enforcement when tensions arose in partnerships at the local level. These factors helped to smooth the process and add a sense of commitment and certainty on sites, which had previously stalled, often because of difficulties in land assembly, viability or agreeing priorities.

### ***It is about more than housing***

Housing Zones have certainly captured the imagination the boroughs and are attracting increased interest from developers. One reason for their appeal is that they offer nuanced, site-specific visions—the antithesis of the housing sausage machine that cranks out generic units and sterile places. All the participants stressed that one of the key features about Housing Zones today was that they were fundamentally about place-making and the delivery of new communities. In fact, many of our experts called for a widening of the remit of Housing Zones noting that combining these with the capacity to deliver high quality employment would be vital to the future success of London.

### ***Do the homes built represent additional units and are they affordable?***

Generally, participants agreed that the homes were additional ones that otherwise would not have been built – at least within a reasonable timeframe. For the most part (and accepting the constraints of current planning and housing policy) our experts also felt they helped deliver additional affordable units.

### ***What are the challenges?***

Overall the participants felt that there might be a natural limit to the replicability and extendibility of Housing Zones in the short term, more because both the construction industry and London boroughs faced issues of capacity and expertise, rather than because of anything inherent in the model or any lack of opportunities/need. Local authorities have experienced continuing cuts to staff and finance. As the smooth and efficient running of Housing Zones requires a skilled, dedicated delivery team, it would be very difficult to accommodate too many additional zones in an already overstretched system.

Perhaps the biggest issue at the moment is that most Housing Zones are still at an early stage – with planning permission still to be obtained. Success depends upon maintaining momentum. Yet current policy changes, notably with respect to starter homes, may require major changes to planned outputs. More generally, all

the NPPF and to the definition of affordable housing would nullify the accomplishments of the Housing Zones. There was a real sense that planning at the local level was being denuded in favour of more centralist mono-cultural view of how housing should be delivered and of what constitutes true affordability, especially for London. Local planners' ability to coordinate and plan with the market may be entirely stripped away, meaning that vehicles like Housing Zones would be ineffective in the future.

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Logos and map designed by Alessandra Mossa. Website designed by Marshall Bradley.

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